



Let's
Talk
About . . .

Sexuality Education and Religion

By Ann L. Hanson, Minister for Children, Families and Human Sexuality, United Church of Christ

Is it puzzling to see the words 'sexuality education' and 'religion' in the same sentence? Many people think these two subjects haven't much to do with each other. Or, in many instances, we think of one as having nothing to do with the other.

I was born in northeastern Montana into a Christian family. No one in my home talked about sexuality. Oh, I was given the traditional 'book and box' * of knowledge when I was eleven or twelve, and asked if I had any questions; but I was never exposed to anything bordering on healthy sexuality education. Now, I can't blame my parents—they didn't know anything different.

And what did I learn about sexuality in my faith community? Absolutely nothing. The overall feeling I received about sexuality was: "It's a deep secret, it's kind of dirty, and you save it for the one you love!" But, I spent hours sharing knowledge and curiosity with my girlfriends and combing the drug store for 'just' the magazine that would give me the information I wanted and needed. Looking back, I don't know whether to laugh or weep.

Now, many years (and three children and six grandchildren) later, I find myself as a sexuality educator in a religious setting. What can I say now that I couldn't say years ago about sexuality education and religion?

As a Christian, I inherited a tradition that has sought to separate our bodies from our minds and spirits. Volumes have been written casting our bodies as a negative part of who we are. There were, and continue to be, inherent fears, misunderstandings and guilt about sexuality. However, many people of faith are working in life-affirming and, in many cases, life-saving ways to heal this separation and fear.

Often, people equate sexuality with sex—particularly, sexual acts. However, sexuality includes so much more. It includes sensuality, intimacy, identity, health, and reproduction. Because sexuality is often used to influence, manipulate, and control others in ways that are harmful and destructive to the body and spirit, faith communities are called to support an ethic of human sexuality that embraces healing and health, justice and mutuality.

Most religions celebrate wholeness for all people, including children and youth, and most believe that sexuality is a gift of the divine. Many people of diverse culture, race, and religion believe that, in order to provide an opportunity for wholeness, we must also provide information that will enable all people to make life affirming decisions—and this includes providing comprehensive information about sexuality.



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Most religious leaders lift up the child as a symbol of hope. Many still profess, however, that we must protect our children and youth (and, in many instances, adults) from education about sexuality. Resistance to providing information and a forum for honest dialogue on issues related to human sexuality—either in faith communities or in secular settings—often comes from people's unwillingness to question firmly held beliefs. And, it's something we are not used to doing. However, the rewards can be great—healing can occur and knowledge gained that offer cause for celebration.

My experience, as a sexuality educator to both youth and adults, has been one of the most powerful parts of my spiritual journey. Youth have told me that having sexuality education classes in their faith communities has been the best gift their church has ever given them—a place where any question will be answered and where guilt and fear have not been used as a way to control them. They have been appreciative, too, that caring and loving adults have respected them enough to give them the information upon which they can make responsible decisions. Parents and caretakers of children and youth are grateful for the ministry of sexuality education. And adults have rejoiced in the knowledge that their sexuality is, indeed, a precious gift of the holy!

* Refers to a booklet on menstruation and accompanying sanitary pads, in the past often the only education about puberty available to many pre-adolescent girls in the United States.

Recommended Resources:

Sexuality and Faith: A Companion to Our Whole Lives. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1999. To purchase, visit www.uua.org/owl/ or www.ucc.org/justice/owl/.

A Time to Speak: Faith Communities and Sexuality Education by Debra Haffner. New York: Sexuality Information & Education Council of the United States, 1999. To purchase, visit www.siecus.org/publications/.

A Time to Build: Creating Sexually Healthy Faith Communities. Religious Institute on Sexuality, Morality, Justice and Healing, 2001. To purchase, visit www.religiousthought.org.

Created in God's Image: A Human Sexuality Program for Ministry and Mission. United Church of Christ, 1993. To purchase, visit www.ucc.org/justice/cigi/.

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